

LITERACY WORKS FOR

# Visual Arts

BOOK 1

Visual language



# Published 2025 Revised for 2024 syllabus

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# Visual language

This book aims to help students understand visual language and visual arts conventions.

Understanding visual language and conventions is essential for Visual Arts practice and critical and historical studies. Yet many students do not fully understand these conventions and others find the visual arts terminology confusing and challenging.

By learning about conventions of representation and visual language, students will be able to:

- analyse artworks
- use visual arts terminology and technicality
- understand the **structural viewpoint**
- apply this knowledge in writing about art and interpreting artworks (see Book 2)
- prepare for senior studies of Visual Arts.

This book is not trying to meet all the syllabus outcomes or cover all content. Instead, it covers a foundational and important area of Visual Arts knowledge and understanding.



Literacy Works for Visual Arts Book I covers these visual qualities and conventions

# **Elements**

colour

line

texture

tone / value

shape

form

space

pattern

sound

light

time symbols

# Principles of design and composition

contrast

balance

proportion

scale

hierarchy

rhythm and movement

unity

emphasis

variety

similarity

Each page of this book provides clear definitions, examples from real artworks and practical analysis and writing activities.





Syllabus links to outcomes and content can be found on the following pages.



See Book 2 for more literacy in Visual Arts - grammar and explicit writing

# How to use this book



Easy to use - just copy/print and teach



Saves you time



Flexible - fits with your topics



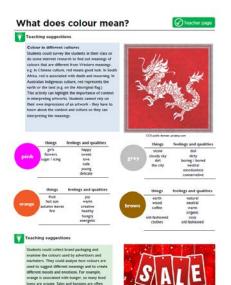
**Teach content and literacy together** 

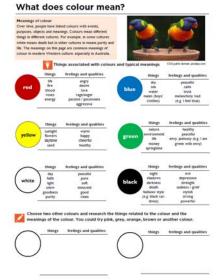
# Book layout

To make it easy for teachers, we have laid out the pages so that answers and worksheets are on facing pages.

# **Teacher pages**

contain answer sheets for display and teaching suggestions.





Student pages
are blackline
master worksheets
- copy or print as
much as you like.
Some pages will
need to be
displayed in colour
so you can use an
ebook or scan and
project it on a
screen.

# **Assignments**

These activities can help students with analysis assignments when they have to interpret artworks and write longer reports (see Book 2). This book clearly describes and explains the elements and principles of visual conventions and what they mean.

# Blackline masters

Each page in this book is a blackline master, so you can copy or print it as often as you like. An unlimited site licence is included for copying and printing of this book. You can make student booklets and share the content with teachers from your school.

# Homework

These pages make great homework activities for students in Year 7 and 8. Cover the elements in class and give students analysis and writing activities for homework.

# Perfect for extras if you're away

The activities in this book are perfect for extra lessons if you need to set work for your class. You can mix and match the pages depending on the topic or case study you are doing with each class. Just copy / print and teach!

# Syllabus links: Visual Arts 7-10 (2024)

This book relates to outcomes, content and teaching advice in the NSW syllabus for Visual Arts 7-10 2024 for implementation in 2027.

# TOPIC Stage 4

# Stage 5

# **Art-making: Artworld concepts**

A student makes artworks to represent ideas that explore Artworld concepts and their relationships VA4-AMC-01

# Content

# Artist

- Explore how artists represent ideas and interests in their art making
- Identify how artists use materials and approaches to represent ideas, and apply to own art making

### Artwork

- Recognise how artworks function as forms of representation in the artworld
- Explore the ways artworks represent subject matter and ideas to audiences in art making

# **Teaching advice**

# Considering choices in materials and art forms that represent ideas

In Stage 4 consider:

- explaining and demonstrating the material qualities of a range of art forms, including texture, colour, techniques and effects, and the aesthetic conventions that have been applied
- explaining the physical and/or virtual properties of an artwork, including structural features such as composition, form, shape, techniques, spatial layout, interactive features, sensory dimensions and spatial dynamics

A student makes and refines artworks to represent different ideas informed by an understanding of Artworld concepts and their relationships VA5-AMC-01

# Content

### Artist

- Examine how artists represent intentions, ideas and interests to inform own art making
- Investigate and compare how artists use art forms, materials and approaches to represent meaning, and apply to own art making with increasing autonomy

### Artwork

- Evaluate how artworks function as forms of representation in the artworld
- Investigate the ways artworks represent artists' intentions and ideas in art making

# Teaching advice

# Developing and refining art making

In Stage 5 consider:

- assisting students to consider the material qualities of art forms and how these represent meaning, such as historical significance, symbolic value or cultural context
- explaining and demonstrating specific artistic techniques

# **Art-making: Viewpoints**

A student uses Viewpoints to explore and develop artistic intent and represent meaning in artworks VA4-AMV-01

# Content

### Structural

- Explore how to communicate meaning in art making using codes, symbols, signs and forms of visual and/or multisensory language
- Recognise how material, physical and symbolic aspects of artworks communicate meaning to audiences and apply this understanding to own art making

# Teaching advice

In Stage 4 consider:

- using examples to encourage students to code artworks using art conventions, symbols and signs as a visual and/or multimodal language
- providing students with opportunities to experiment with formal qualities such as: colour and compositional devices in painting; spatial relationships in sculpture; form, space and light in traditional drawing

A student applies and evaluates Viewpoints to refine artistic intent and represent meaning in artworks VA5-AMV-01

# Content

### Structural

- Investigate how to communicate meanings and apply ethical practices in art making using codes, symbols, signs and forms of visual and/or multisensory language
- Evaluate how the choice of material, physical and symbolic aspects of artworks communicates meaning to audiences and apply this understanding to own art making

# Teaching advice

In Stage 5 consider:

 encouraging students to code artworks using art conventions, material qualities, symbols and signs as a visual and/or multisensory language, such as iconography, metaphors and allegories to represent more complex ideas, beliefs or historical events

# Syllabus links: Visual Arts 7-10 (2024)

This book relates to outcomes, content and teaching advice in the NSW syllabus for Visual Arts 7-10 2024 for implementation in 2027.

# TOPIC Stage 4 Stage 5

# Art critical and historical studies: Artworld concepts

A student explains Artworld concepts in Art critical and historical studies VA4-CHC-01

### Content

### **Artwork**

- Explore different art forms considering their representational properties
- Explain how artworks are constructed to convey meaning to audiences

# Teaching advice

In Stage 4 consider:

- encouraging students to consider the types of art forms, conventions, media and techniques that artists choose to support their intentions
- explaining how art forms have different representational properties, such as texture, colour, scale, light or interactive elements

A student analyses and interprets Artworld concepts and their relationships in Art critical and historical studies VA5-CHC-01

### Content

### **Artwork**

- Analyse different forms of artworks, considering the role and function of their representational properties
- Explain how and why artworks are intentionally constructed to convey meaning for audiences

### Teaching advice

In Stage 5 consider:

 explaining how artists convey layered meanings through the use of materials, properties, techniques and procedures when they conceptualise and create their artworks, artefacts or sites

# Art critical and historical studies: Viewpoints

A student explains meaning in artworks and the artworld using Viewpoints VA4-CHV-01

# Content

### **Structural**

 Investigate how artworks represent systems of signs, symbols, codes and forms of visual and/or multisensory language to structure and communicate meaning

# **Teaching advice**

In Stage 4 consider:

- showing examples of how artists communicate through artworks using the Structural Viewpoint
- providing opportunities for students to discuss how artists code artworks using art conventions, symbols and signs as a visual and/or multimodal language
- drawing attention to how material qualities and the physical and/or virtual properties of artworks convey symbolism

A student interprets meaning and significance of artworks and the artworld using Viewpoints VA5-CHV-01

### Content

### **Structural**

Investigate how artworks represent systems of signs, symbols, codes and forms of visual and/or multisensory language to structure and communicate meanings

### Teaching advice

In Stage 5 consider:

- providing examples of artworks to demonstrate how artists
   encode meaning to communicate their intentions
- drawing students' attention to how artworld practitioners use formal organisation, art conventions, symbolism, signs and material qualities to communicate meaning



Display or show this page in colour

The student page (opposite) defines important terms but there is no activity on this page. This page could be displayed for students and discussed before the activities on the following pages.





The artwork below will be analysed at the end of this section.



Glowing Night, O. Bluemner, 1924.

CCO. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Charles F. Ikle,
1963, www.metmuseum.org.

# About the artist

Oscar Bluemner (1867-1938) was an American Modernist artist. He trained to be an architect and designer but focused on painting for most of his career. He was influenced by Cubism and the Expressionists' use of colour. Bluemner's works demonstrate his architect's understand of form, with attention to urban and natural forms and scenes, with intense and evocative colours.

Sources: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and www.artsy.net

# Important colour words

# Colour value

Value means how light or dark a colour is. It is based on the amount of light coming from it. Some hues can have a dark value (e.g. dark blue) and a light value (e.g. light blue).

# **Tints**

A hue can be mixed with white to make them lighter. This is called a **tint**.

### **Shades**

A hue can be mixed with black to make it darker. This is called a **shade**.



Tint of blue + white

shades of blue

blue with more black blue with less black

# **Palette**

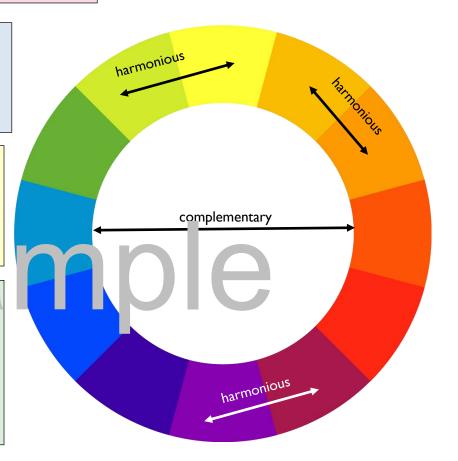
Palette is a French word that means a tray of paint colours. It also means the range of colours used in an art work.

# Colour wheel

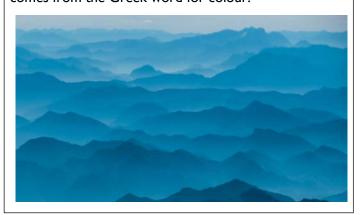
The colour wheel is a way of arranging colours that shows the relationship between primary, secondary and tertiary colours (see pages 5-6).

**Harmonious** colours are 'mile an are close together on the colour wheel e.g. red and purple. Harmony means getting along well.

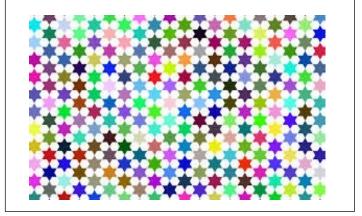
**Complementary** colours are opposites on the colour wheel and produce contrasting or clashing effects e.g. blue and orange.



**Monochromatic** means one colour. The colour scheme is one main colour and different values (tints and shades) of that colour. Mono means one. Chroma comes from the Greek word for colour.



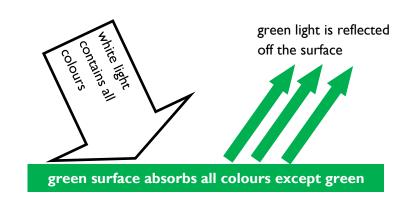
**Polychromatic** means many colours or multicoloured. Poly means many. Chroma comes from the Greek word for colour.



# Colour hue

# Colour

Colour is a visual quality of an object. Colour is created by the way light is reflected off an object. Normal sunlight (white light) contains all the colours even though it looks white. The qualities of an object make it absorb some colours and reflect other colours. We see reflected light as colour. **Hue** means the name of a colour e.g. green, blue.





The names of hues are shown in circles below. You can also see other hue names and objects associated with different colours. Draw a line to match the synonyms with the related hue in the circle. These synonyms might help you describe colours effectively.

related fide in t	ne en ele: These sy	nonyms imgilt ne	ip you describe colours e	ilectively.
red	_flame	scarlet	ivory	green
Teu	crimson	porcelain	violet	green
	chalk	mandarin	pearl	
	Sa	ndi ;o	rb E	
orange	licorice	coal	carrot	purple
	mauve	tangerine	sunshine	
	sky	blood	emerald	
yellow	lavender	leaf	lemon	white
	egg-yolk	sapphire	pea	
	milk	rose	gold	
blue	night	wine	navy	
	ink	peach	lilac	black

# Words for describing colour intensity

# **Colour intensity**

Intensity means how strong the colour is. This is also called **saturation**. A strong colour has no white, gray or black added. We can think of colours along a scale, from not intense or saturated, to quite or moderately intense, to very saturated and intense.

not intense quite intense very intense



Snowdon after an April Hailstorm, A.W. Hunt, 1857.
CC0. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harry G. Sperling Fund, 2016,
www.metmuseum.org.



CC0 Creative Commons. Raheel 9630 pixabay.com

dull muted pale soft watery weak in ense sa urated bright pure

undiluted deep rich vivid vibrant strong

e.g. The colours in the painting are muted and pale.

e.g. The colours in the painting are bright and vibrant.

crystal clear

Other useful words for describing colour involve qualities of light, warmth and clarity (how clear it is).



warm colours (like a fire) red orange yellow

silvery fluorescent
glowing iridescent
shining flickering
shiny sparkling
metallic glittery
electric

icy transparent ool colours (like ice)

cool colours (like ice) blue silver green



translucent

watery glassy

Chalcedony Oval, 2nd Century BC. CCO. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest 1942, www.metmuseum.org.

# Writing about tone / value 1





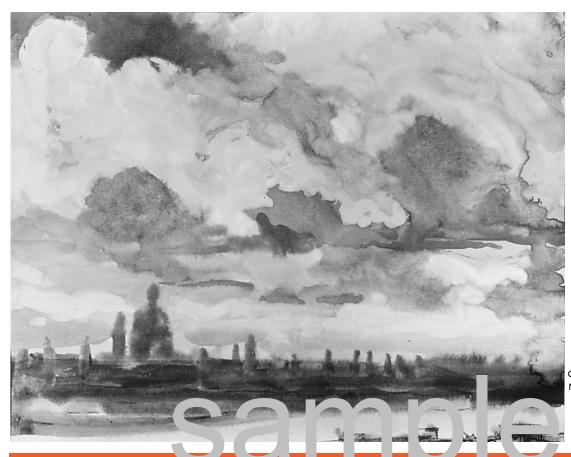


# Finish these sentences to describe the use of tone / value in the painting. Questions What is the subject This painting shows the city of London on the river, with most of the canvas taken up of this painting? by clouds in the sky. Describe the way The city is mostly dark tones, low values in grey and black. These dark tones tone/value is used suggest that the city is gloomy and depressed. These values contrast with the in this painting. swirling clouds which are mostly light, high values. Some darker clouds create the Which parts are impression of stormy weather. This evokes a tense and moody atmosphere. high value? Which Variations in tone are created by shading and different tints of black, white and parts are low value? grey. The watercolour shading of the darker tones also suggests rain. There are no What techniques strong highlights in this painting, but the lightest sections seem to be the glistening have been used? river at the bottom of the painting and some patches of bright white What is the effect? clouds. Are there highlights and What do you think The many dark tones in this painting create a dark, gloomy and stormy mood, but the artist wanted to the lighter tones suggest hope and the possibility of clearing weather. show?

# Writing about tone / value 1



Examine this painting and draw labels and arrows to show the high, mid and low values. Follow the instructions to describe the use of tone / value in the painting.

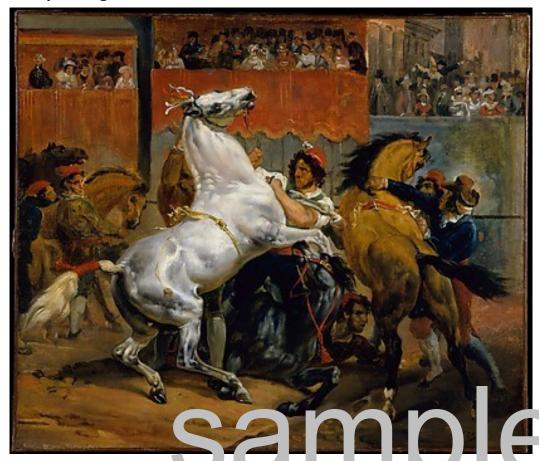


Purple Afternoon, London,
J. Pennell, c. 1926.
CC0. The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Gift of Bartlett Arkell 1942,
www.metmuseum.org.

Questions	Finish these sentences to describe the use of tone / value in the painting.
What is the subject of this painting?	This painting shows
Describe the way tone/value is used in this painting. Which parts are high value? Which parts are low value? What techniques have been used? What is the effect? Are there highlights and shadows?	The city is mostly (what values? light/dark?) These dark tones suggest (what meaning about the city?) These values contrast with the swirling clouds which are mostly (what values? light/dark?) Some darker clouds create the impression of (what kind of weather?) This evokes a (what kind of mood?) Variations in tone are created by (what techniques?) The watercolour shading of the darker tones also suggests rain. There are no strong highlights in this painting, but the lightest sections seem to be the (what aspects/parts? what does it show?)
What do you think the artist wanted to show?	The many dark tones in this painting create a (what kind of mood or emotion overall?)mood, but the lighter tones suggest (what mood or emotion ?)

# Writing about tone / value 2

Use the model description on page 56 and describe the use of tone / value in this painting.



This painting shows the start of a horse race in Rome, Italy, in the early 1800s. No jockeys or riders were used - the horses raced down a one -mile street, as part of the Rome Carnival. The race was a wild and exciting event and many people attended. Some observers reported that people were cruel to the horses sometimes.

The Start of the Race of the
Riderless Horses,
H. Vernet, 1820.
CC0. The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Catherine Lorillard Wolfe

Collection 1887, www.metmuseum.org.

Finish these sentences to describe the use of tone / value in the painting. **Questions** to What is the subject This painting shows \_\_\_ of this painting? Describe the way tone/value is used in this painting. Which parts are high value? Which parts are low value? What techniques have been used? What is the effect? Are there highlights and shadows? What do you think the artist wanted to show?

# Aspects of visual space

Artists who create artworks in 2D, such as paintings, drawings, sketches, stencils, photographs, create the illusion of space and depth in their artworks. The next few pages explain some words to describe visual space.



quite empty

moderately crowded

crowded



Space can be uncrowded and open. This creates a sense of empty space or a void. It can suggest a feeling of calm and peacefulness.

Crowded space is very full and busy. It can create an energetic or chaotic impression.







shallow

fairly shallow

quite endless

endless



Space can seem shallow, as there is of much depth or distance between the closest and furthest points in the two-k

Jt



spacean seem endless or deep, stretches on for a long way r endlessly.







closed

open

A closed use of space means that the artwork exists within boundaries like a frame e.g. still life and portraits.

An open use of space means that the artwork seems to continue beyond the boundaries of the frame e.g. landscapes.





# **Perspective**

**Perspective** comes from the Latin word 'perspicere', to see through. Perspective means how the eye sees something. Perspective in Visual Arts relates to how we show a three dimensional image on a flat surface. This page shows some ways that artist have used perspective (or not) throughout history in different cultures. These are only a few of the ways of using perspective. You can find out more about linear perspective on pages X-X.

# 1. flat perspective

The people and objects are drawn as if they are flat, often in profile. Objects and the background are independent. There is no sense of depth.



I. Harvest scene. Ancient Egypt.

# 2. no fixed perspective

The viewer is not positioned in one place. Instead, the viewer is positioned at multiple points.



2. Bugaku dancers. Japan.

# 3. linear perspective

Western Art. Parallel lines  $a_{P_1}$  to  $dr_2$  eth r and neet the horizon. Objects closer to the vie fer are argor that objects further away (such as in the artwork on the right).

# 4. amplified perspective foreshortening

Objects close to the viewer are extremely large or exaggerated.



4. Fist

# The same of the sa

3. The Boulevarde Montmartre on a Rainy Day, C. Pissarro. 1897.

# 5. multiple perspectives/ multi-point perspective

An object is viewed from multiple points of view - from the side, from above, from below - all in the same artwork.



Multipoint perspective drawing.

6. Objects on a Table, P. H. Bruce. 1920.

# 6. no linear perspective Some modern artists (e.g. Cubists) did

not use linear perspective. There is no sense of realistic depth. Instead there are multiple, irregular perspectives.



# **Patterning techniques**

Patterns are created by repeating and changing certain visual qualities including: shape, size, colour, texture, direction.

hearts

same shape same size same texture

different direction, colours





spiral/curls

same texture, direction

different sizes, colours



Analyse the patterns in the artworks below. Write a sentence to explain what visual qualities create the pattern - what changes and what repeats? You only have to mention the most important visual qualities.



1. Islamic mosaic pattern, pixabay.com



2. Evening dress, Myrbor, 1924.



3. Self-portrait in a Straw Hat, V. van Gogh, 1887.



4. Glass inlay. Egypt, 100BC.



5. Bottle, USA, 1920.

# e.g. The pattern is formed by (what shapes? doing what? how?)

The pattern is formed by small textured hearts of the same size but different colours facing different directions.


# 8. Sound Sound



Sound is an important part of multimedia performances. This element is closely related to Music, so perhaps you could collaborate with your Music teacher colleagues in interpretation of sound art. Also see Book 2 pages 15-16 which has a grammar worksheet on the topic of Sound Art.



# sound media

What thing or people are creating the sound? Is it:

- electronic / artificial / recorded?
- natural / live? ✓
- diegetic? (visible or on the screen e.g. a sound made by an object) ✓
- non-diegetic? (not visible e.g. background music)
- noise from the environment?
- words / lyrics? ✓

### volume

how loud or soft?

- mostly loud
- mostly soft ✓
- soft and loud

# rhythm

is it fast or slow?

- mostly fast
- mostly slow
- fast and slow ✓

# pitch

are the sounds low or high?

- mostly low sounds ✓
- mostly high sounds
- low and high sounds

# tone colour or mood

what is the quality of the sound or the effect?

- harsh
- clashing (discordant)
- smooth and mellow ✓
- brilliant and bright
- distorted and aggressive





Try these links or search for AquaSonic performances:

https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=LSYUINhvuOQ

https://vimeo.com/157160098

It is not essential for students to watch/ hear this performance before they do the activity on the opposite page.

Last week, I want to see a performance that was partly a music concert and partly an art installation. It was called AquaSonic. The artists were from Denmark. They sat in water tanks and played music and sang underwater. The tanks were lit from behind in dark and moody colours (dull green and blue and yellow) with lots of shadows and a dark background. The performers had to hold their breaths for a long time. They used strange musical instruments like gongs, drums and bells and a special violin that could be played underwater. The sounds were very strange, like they were from another world. The music was soft, slow and low pitched and did not have any strong melodies. AquaSonic performers created a sad and mellow dream-like mood in their performance. Then the performers came out of the tanks and blew through plastic tubes into tall, clear containers of water to make bubbles. The bubbling water made different sounds, from slow 'blob blob' noises to faster 'bubble bubble bubble' sounds. It was very funny because they sounded a bit like farting or burping noises. AquaSonic was weird but interesting and atmospheric. The artists' intention is to celebrate the importance of water in our lives and to help use, see and hear water in a new way. The performance certainly achieved this aim.

# Sound

Sound is an important part of many art installations and artworks, particularly artworks that use film and multimedia. One type of art, called sound art, uses sound as a medium. In an artwork, sound could include music or background noises or sound effects. This page describes some ways of describing sound.

# sound media

What thing or people are creating the sound?

### Is it:

- electronic / artificial / recorded?
- natural / live?
- diegetic? (visible or on the screen
   e.g. a sound made by an object)
- non-diegetic? (not visible e.g. background music)
- noise from the environment?
- words / lyrics?

# volume

how loud or soft?

- mostly loud
- mostly soft
- soft and loud

# rhythm

is it fast or slow?

- mostly fast
- mostly slow
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are the sounds low or high?

- mostly low sounds
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- low and high sounds

# tone colour or mood

what is the quality of the sound or the effect?

- harsh
- clashing (discordant)
- smooth and mellow
- brilliant and bright
- distorted and aggressive



Read the review below of an art performance that includes sound. Underline all the words that describe sound. Then look at the boxes above and tick at least the word from each boxes above describe the use of some

Last week, I went to see a performance that was partly a music concert and partly an art installation. It was called AquaSonic. The artists were from Denmark. They sat in water tanks and played music and sang underwater. The tanks were lit from behind in dark and moody colours (dull green and blue and yellow) with lots of shadows and a dark background. The performers had to hold their breaths for a long time. They used strange musical instruments like gongs, drums and bells and a special violin that could be played underwater. The sounds were very strange, like they were from another world. The music was soft, slow and low pitched and did not have any strong melodies. AquaSonic performers created a sad and mellow dream-like mood in their performance. Then the performers came out of the tanks and blew through plastic tubes into tall, clear containers of water to make bubbles. The bubbling water made different sounds, from slow 'blob blob' noises to faster 'bubble bubble bubble' sounds. It was very funny because they sounded a bit like farting or burping noises. AquaSonic was weird but interesting and atmospheric. The artists' intention is to celebrate the importance of water in our lives and to help use, see and hear water in a new way. The performance certainly achieved this aim.





# Sound analysis template

This template can be used for analysing sound in an art work.

	SOUND ANALYSIS		es or tick tl to the art		Write a sentence to summarise your points
I	Name the artwork and the artist and time period, and anything else you know about the style and context.				
2	Write one sentence briefly describing the subject of the artwork.				
3	What words describe the sound media?	natural / live	artificial / electronic / recorded		
		diegetic (visible)	non- diegetic (not visible)		
		music / lyrics	sounds / sound effects		
	Name the media if you can e.g. female voices, drums etc.				
4	Describe the volume (lou ar soft sounds)	nostly oft	ftad	los /	
5	Describe the pitch (low and high sounds)	mostly low	low and high	mostly high	
6	Describe the rhythm (slow and fast sounds)	mostly slow	slow and fast	mostly fast	
7	Describe the tone colour (quality or effect of the sound)	harsh	clashing (discordant)	smooth and mellow	
		brilliant and bright	distorted and aggressive	other	
8	Describe the overall effect or meanings of sound in the artwork. Write anything special that has not already been mentioned. (2-3 sentences)				







# **Teaching suggestions**

The page opposite explains terminology for light and also shows examples. Larger versions of the photographs are shown below (Source: www.metmuseum.org).

See more on light in the section on tone / value on pages 53-60.

There is also a useful page on use of light to create texture on pages 49-50.

# A fantastic video

Lighting Techniques in the Smithsonian Art Museum

This video shows one gallery with no lights on. One by one, each light is turned on and the effect of each is clearly shown. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dlwkqiY\_AA



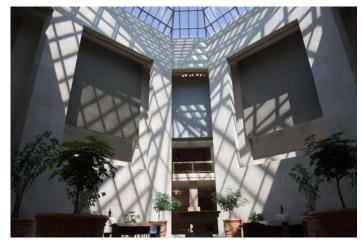












# References



The resources on this page are references for this book and also useful further reading on Literacy in Visual Arts.

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